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**Book review of: Ian F. Shaw, Jennifer C. Greene and Melvin M. Mark, The  
SAGE Handbook of evaluation. Policies, programs and practices, London.  
SAGE Publications, 2006**

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## Book Review

Shaw, Ian F. / Greene, Jennifer C. / Mark, Melvin M.  
(Eds.) (2006):

### **The Sage Handbook of Evaluation**

Sage, 2006, 608 pp. Hardcover, £85.00 / \$130.00 / € 108.90 (amazon.de)  
ISBN 978-0-7619-7305-8

Reviewed by Thomas Widmer

This handbook is certainly an ambitious enterprise, since "it is intended to offer a definitive, benchmark statement on evaluation theory and practice for the first decades of the twenty-first century" (p. 4). The editors continue: "In developing this Handbook, we strove to offer a coherent picture of the nature and role of evaluative inquiry in contemporary twenty-first century societies around the globe" (ibid.). At the end of this review, I will return to these goals but first, let me briefly present the content of the handbook. This summary will by no means reflect the substance of this extensive volume; the intention is just to give some ideas.

The handbook contains 26 chapters, authored or co-authored by 43 eminent scholars, organized along four main sections, namely:

- Role and purpose of evaluation in society,
- Evaluation as a social practice,
- The practice of evaluation, and
- Domains of evaluation practice.

In the introduction the editors of the handbook (*Melvin M. Mark, Jennifer C. Greene* and *Ian F. Shaw*) provide an overview of the field of evaluation in general, and an introduction into the scope and the structure of the handbook.

The first main section on the role and purpose of evaluation in society starts with a contribution by *Eleanor Chelimsky* on the relevance of evaluation in the political system of the USA, especially in three respects, namely accountability, development and knowledge purposes. *Stewart I. Donaldson* and *Mark W. Lipsey* highlight the practical relevance of theories (theory of evaluation practice, social science theory and program theory) in evaluation, by advocating a program theory-driven evaluation science approach. *Patricia J. Rogers* and *Bob Williams* discuss nine select evaluation approaches from the perspective of research in individual and organizational learning and organizational dynamics. In an intellectually challenging and thought provoking piece, *Thomas A. Schwandt* and *Holli Burgon* explore the significance of lived experiences, and practices in and for evaluation. The next chapter, authored by *Jennifer C. Greene*, contains a rich and balanced discussion of democratically-oriented evaluation approaches (namely, democratic, deliberative democratic, participatory, critically, and culturally-contextually responsive evaluation). *Peter Dahler-Larsen* highlights in his contribution five factors that influence the field of evaluation: first popularization of evaluation, second organizational structures and processes, third the market, fourth the media, and finally fifth research.

The second main section entitled 'Evaluation as a social practice' is introduced by an article authored by *Philip Davies*, *Kathryn Newcomer*, and *Haluk Soydan* describing different aspects and roles of governments in the context of evaluation activities. Based on three vignettes illustrating the relevance and significance of social relations in evaluation practices, *Tineke A. Abma* calls for more attention to the diverse characteristics of social relations in evaluation. In a chapter contributed by *John Stevenson* and *David Thomas*, the focus lies on the interdependencies between evaluation on the one hand and historical, cultural, and disciplinary traditions on the other hand. *Ove Karlsson Vestman* and *Ross F. Conner* discuss three distinct positions on the relationship between evaluation and politics; the value-neutral, the value-sensitive, and the value-critical evaluator. *Helen Simons* provides an overview of various (and distinct) forms of codifications and institutionalizations with ethical concerns. In their contribution on utilization, *J. Bradley Cousins* and *Lyn M. Shulha* compare the state of research in evaluation utilization and

knowledge utilization. *Elliot Stern* presents, in the concluding chapter of this main section, some personal reflections by a non-academic practitioner on the increasingly professional, global, and commercial activities with which the evaluation community is confronted.

The first contribution in the third main section on ‘The practice of evaluation’ authored by *Melvin M. Mark* and *Gary T. Henry* deals with the question of causality in evaluation designs, with a special emphasis on mediator/moderator models in experimental and quasi-experimental designs. *Elizabeth Whitmore*, *Irene Guijt*, *Donna M. Mertens*, *Pamela S. Imm*, *Matthew Chinman* and *Abraham Wandersman* discuss the characteristics of a social justice and improvement oriented evaluation, based on three examples following three distinct, but related approaches to evaluation, particularly empowerment evaluation, the monitoring of ‘most significant changes’ and transformative evaluation. *Robert Walker* and *Michael Wiseman* in a chapter “about getting evaluations done” (p. 360) focus on the management of evaluation projects in a policy context, and with an explicit managerial approach. *Marvin C. Alkin*, *Christina A. Christie* and *Mike Rose* emphasize in their chapter the important role of communication for evaluation practices in general, and provide a detailed discussion focused on communicating about evaluation findings. *Robert E. Stake* and *Thomas A. Schwandt* present a fundamental treatise on discerning quality in evaluation, by introducing a distinction between quality-as-measured and quality-as-experienced, and discuss the challenging responsibility of the evaluator to represent and judge quality. In the concluding chapter of this main section, *Lois-Ellin Datta* identifies, based on the content of the preceding chapters, several past, present and future challenges for evaluation practice.

The fourth main section of the handbook concentrates on evaluation practices in specific domains: *David Nevo* presents experiences in educational evaluation at the different levels of the educational system. *Andrew Long* discusses four evaluation studies on health services with four common topics. *Ian Shaw*, with *Carol T. Mowbray* and *Hazel Qureshi*, illustrates evaluation practices in social work and human services, by presenting two evaluation studies. In the chapter on evaluation practices in criminal justice, *Nick Tilley* and *Alan Clarke* demonstrate the weaknesses of current practices and formu-

late ten desiderata (among them ‘more action research’) for the future. In a common chapter, *Oswaldo Feinstein* discusses evaluation practices in international development activities, whereas *Tony Beck* presents evaluation activities in the field of humanitarian interventions. In the concluding chapter, *Alan Clarke* compares evaluation practices in the different fields with respect to the evidence-based agenda.

Overall, the editors of the handbook present a broad and diverse representation of current discourses in the evaluation community. Four topics are especially well represented in various chapters of the handbook:

1. *Programme-theory and/or logic models*: These concepts are seen as both a substitutive alternative for, and as a way to improve, black box evaluation approaches, neglecting the inner causal structures of programmes. Interestingly, the theoretically inspired approaches to evaluation form (although not coherent in every respect) a common ground of discussion for hitherto strictly separated streams of evaluation literature.
2. *Participation in evaluation* is widely accepted as a means to generate commitment by the stakeholders for evaluation conduct and utilization, and/or as a means to activate (empower) stakeholders in their own practices. Although the general principle of participation is rarely challenged any more, the degree of stakeholder involvement varies considerably between distinct evaluation approaches. The approaches postulating a high level of involvement are well represented in the volume. The same holds true for constructivist, hermeneutic, and naturalistic approaches, working mainly with qualitative methods.
3. *Evaluation standards*, guidelines and codes of behavior and the general concern for quality in evaluation are well represented in several chapters of the handbook. Whereas among the authors from the USA these codifications are highly accepted without challenging their importance and significance for the evaluation profession (p. 62; 386; 394), the European based contributors are more skeptical in various respects. Furthermore, in this area the Handbook shows various misrepresentations and/or misunderstandings. Obviously, the Program Evaluation Standards were formulated by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation

(Joint Committee 1994); therefore neither the American Evaluation Association (p. 556; p. 605) nor the American Educational Research Association (p. 424) have developed them. It is also not accurate, as stipulated several times in the handbook (p. 249; p. 262; p. 309), that evaluation standards are directed towards the evaluator only. They usually address all parties (including commissioners and other stakeholders) involved in an evaluation (Joint Committee 1994: 1 and 4-5; Widmer 2004). Furthermore, it is at least misleading to neglect the distinct purposes of these codifications. Some of them deal with ethical conduct of individuals; others are concerned with the quality of evaluation processes and products. In addition, the evaluation standards discussed are, neither by definition nor by assumption or intention, regulatory (p. 249), and there is to my knowledge no national evaluation society worldwide with enforcement mechanisms in place as implied (*ibid.*).

4. *Evidence-based practice* is the fourth strand of discourse present in many of the contributions to the handbook. Obviously, in this respect, strong disagreement is observable among the scholars contributing to the volume. The discussions about evidence-based practices are in the first place shaped by methodological issues. This discourse is astonishingly similar to debates more than thirty years ago. *Carol Weiss*, for example, stated in 1973: "... programs operate in a political context. They are not the clear definable 'treatments' or 'interventions' of the research laboratory but complex often ambiguous amalgams of strategies and modes of operation" (Weiss 1973: 180). Furthermore, it comes as a surprise that this discourse is mainly methods-driven. The differences between evidence-based *medicine* or other professional *practices* on the one hand, and evidence-based *policy-making* on the other hand are seldom accounted for. However, to assume that political decision-making is equivalent with professional decision-making is presumably wrong (compare Lindblom/Cohen 1979; Knott/Wildavsky 1980; Weiss/Bucuvalas 1980; Majone 1989).

In conclusion, let me assess how far the editors and contributors have reached their own goals. First it should be noted that the handbook reflects the state of the art in evaluation theory and practice. The list of contributors is impres-

sive, it reads like a ‘Who is who’ in evaluation in the USA and in the UK, only with few prominent scholars missing. The broad focus of approaches represented in the volume is especially positive. The handbook provides a very rich and dense picture of current issues in evaluation. Nevertheless, there are, in respect to the very ambitious goals formulated by the editors, also some shortcomings to note:

- The focus of the handbook could be elaborated more clearly. Whereas in the introductory chapter the editors announce a focus on “directly *people-related* programs, policies and practices” (p. 3; emphasis in original), several contributions interpret this restriction in diverging ways.
- The structure of the handbook, especially the division into the four main sections, is not fully convincing. Whereas the fourth part of the compilation has a clear, domain-oriented focus, the other three main sections are not clearly distinguishable by their content. Furthermore, the concluding chapters in the four sections do not always wrap up the contributions in their respective sections in a successful way.
- Handbooks of this kind often contain a section of domain specific discussions. To fit into the overall concept, these domain specific contributions have to be accessible to lay people on the one hand. On the other hand, these articles can hardly fulfill the expectations of readers familiar with the domain at hand.
- The handbook is not in every respect well edited. There is a widespread mismatch of table, figure and exemplar titles and references in the text. Especially in the case of names, misspelling is not uncommon. Several end notes are totally missing; others are wrongly integrated in the main text.

The main criticism from my point of view relates to the global (sic!) aim of the handbook. The handbook is, in contrast to what is declared, dominated by an Anglo-Saxon perspective. This holds true for the composition of the editorship, authorship and the international advisory board. Out of the 43 authors, only six people are not based in an English speaking country. The

composition of authorship has consequences for the content of the handbook, as illustrated by the following citation:

“The descriptions [in this chapter; TW] are based on the experiences of the authors, who over the years have been involved closely with evaluation in and for the governments of three western countries [Sweden, UK, and USA; TW]. What is presented here provides different examples of government as a structural environment for evaluation. Thus, the frame of reference in this chapter is limited to western European and American government. Although historical and developmental background of the cases described here [is] rooted in the Western traditions of governing nation-states, we believe it is sensible to expect that governments in other parts of the world would profit from, and eventually move towards, a mode of governing by evaluation as those governments become more transparent and more caring about their citizenry.” (p. 165)

This example of a striking cultural insensitivity with respect to other parts of America, other parts of Western Europe, and the rest of the world in general, and a kind of Messianic sense of mission, is perhaps in its density and explicitness singular, although this tendency is present in many contributions: ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ is introduced as an “American cultural tale” (p. 351), by the way in the context of a discussion about cultural competency. Critical theory is discussed at length without mentioning one single scholar from the Frankfurt School. The topic of knowledge utilization is discussed without any references to the long standing tradition of the German ‘Verwendungsforschung’ (Habermas 1969) and it is furthermore postulated that there is no “serious scholarship” (p. 269) in the misuse of (social) scientific knowledge in policy making. This assertion is, with a narrow understanding of use, not surprising at all, since without a defined way of use (typical for ‘pure research’) misuse is an undefined category. With a broader understanding, this statement ignores the discourse on ‘societal technology’ (Habermas/Luhmann 1971; Beck/Bonss 1989). Furthermore, descriptions of evaluation practices in France and Switzerland in no way reflect the developments of the last fifteen years (for example Cauquil/Lafore 2006; Spinatsch 2002; Widmer/Neuen-schwander 2004; and the contributions in Schwartz/Mayne 2005). Other countries and regions with a high level of evaluation activities are not even mentioned in the handbook. Indicative for this restricted perspective is also



the fact that there are no entries for the UK and the USA in the index. This holds as well for the European Union, but for other reasons. The tendency to assume that, with coverage of developments in the USA and the UK, everything is said about evaluation, is common in various contributions in the handbook. Fortunately, there are as well exceptions, such as, for example, the chapter of Schwandt and Burgon, with its well founded inclusion of French and German scholarship. The tendency to neglect developments beyond the Anglo-Saxon world is, I have to admit, not dramatically misleading in many respects, since a lot of evaluation knowledge has its origins in the USA and, to a lesser extent, in the UK, but it stands in stark contrast with the explicit ambitions of the handbook “to avoid national or other forms of ethnocentrism” (p. 5). In addition, this focus is, with respect to the dynamics in evaluation scholarship in recent years in many countries around the globe, increasingly selective, and should be reconsidered in preparing the second edition of the handbook.

To sum up, The Sage Handbook of Evaluation is no doubt, a highly significant and remarkable contribution to evaluation theory and practice. Especially the wide array of divergent perspectives and distinct approaches represented in one single volume is both impressive and intellectually stimulating. In addition, many of the single contributions are of high interest for a wide range of people concerned with evaluation. Although there are some drawbacks, in the first place the limitation to a selective USA-UK centred view of the world, this volume can definitely be recommended for reading.

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